

Fortnightly Sermon

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CHICAGO, ILL.

VOLUME 3

No. 19

THE HISTORICAL INCREMENT

CHICAGO
THIRD CHURCH PUBLISHING COMMITTEE, 917 WEST MONROE STREET
1892

Entered at the post-office at Chicago as second-class matter.

JUNE 1, 1892.

THE FORTNIGHTLY SERMON,

THIRD YEAR,

Contains Mr. Blake's current discourses in the pulpit of the Third Unitarian Church of Chicago. It will be dated the 1st and 15th of each month, as heretofore.

This series will run to July 1,—twenty sermons in all.

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NATURAL RELIGION.

Often have I spoken to you of Natural Religion; and, in one way or another, so long as I shall be continued in the happiness of being with you, I shall have to speak of it, whether under its own plain name or under credit of some other subject. For in truth it is all I have to teach or preach.

That we may now have another look into the face of it, and see some features of it nearly, let us imagine a Jew, a Christian and a Mohammedan talking together. They are talking seriously about religion. Each one also is speaking loyally of his own religion and setting it forth in its fullness. For this, each one begins with the most simple and grand ideas of his faith. They speak of God—of the Infinite, of the Eternal, of Holiness, of Perfectness, of Might and Almightyness, of Life, Love, Beauty, Glory, Joy. They talk of Personal Being in God and in Man, of Thought, of Reason, of the Will and its mysteries, of Feeling, Memory, Imagination, Sleep, Dreams, Birth, Death. They discourse of Worship, of the looking of the Soul with awe-full love unto the Source of it, of God the Father, of Man and all Creatures the Children, of Confidence, Trust, Submission, Piety, Faith. They converse of Duty, of the Command in the Soul, the unlimited Ought, the Majesty of it, the image of the Eternal Holiness which it is in the Human Spirit.

Of such thoughts they commune; and they all speak of them like as if they were one Soul with one tongue, one Heart with one song, one Spirit with one language. They are at one in these simple, grand thoughts. Mayhap if they fall to philosophising about them, they will have different ways of explaining them, or of joining them one to another, or of accounting for them, that they are present in the human mind; but they,

the Jew, the Christian and the Mohammedan, all *have* the thoughts, and rejoice in them, and gladden warmly each other in them.

These thoughts, which they have all together, agreeing in them deeply and joyfully, are the substance of Natural Religion. But now after they have discoursed of these, in simplicity and unity, and have gone far together in the common grand thoughts with which all of them begin their religion, they come to a place where the simpleness of the common path divides, and divers ways open. Here it is found that each one takes a path of his own. Which is to say, without figure, that each one of them goes on to add somewhat to the Natural Religion in which they all are at one,—somewhat of his own, and this addition makes the Natural Religion to become his own peculiar religion.

I may compare this change (from the common substance of Natural Religion into the special faith and form of each of these three who talk together) to the differences in wines; for these are but divers additions to the one bland and sweet element, water. The one lovely, clear and bright refreshment, colorless and wholesome like air, and welcome to the throat of every creature who is athirst, the vehicle of the spring's coolness, the brook's babble, the river, the ocean, the rainy murmur, the crystal of the snow, the silver and gold of the clouds, sparkling, sweet, peaceable water, this makes the greater part, nine parts in ten, or more, very like, of all the wines of the earth. To this gentle solvent add some measure of alcohol and sundry essential oils, and lo! the Falernian sung by Horace. To the same delicate fluent crystal bring a different quantum of spirits, and other essences, and the wines of the Rhine are made. To the same dip of a brook or catch of rain convey yet another measure of spirits, other aromas and oils, and the Catawba of our own poet's song lights its topaz eye. Thus do the Jew, the Christian, and the Mohammedan with the simplicity of Natural Religion. To it one adds a mingling and elements of his own, and forthwith arises Judaism; another brings to the same his own store of somewhat, and then is made Christianity; the other to the same simplicity conveys his quantum of another somewhat, his own addition, and lo! appears Mohammedanism. Each one of them makes his own faith, bearing a special name,

by adding something to that common faith of them which is Natural Religion.

Now, when we look at these additions together, we see two noteworthy things about them all. The first is that they all are historical. It might be looked for beforehand perhaps, that the additions would be new and peculiar doctrines or thoughts joined by each of the three speakers to the common thoughts of Natural Religion, and that by these special thoughts or views the special religion would be made and marked; or at least that some one of the three conversers would add doctrines or thoughts to evoke by them his own faith. But no. All that is of pure thought and ideality they already have agreed on together; it is in the substance of the one religion of them all, Natural Religion. All that either of them adds is *historical*, either certain events in some place and time, or else also with these events doctrines or thoughts growing from the events and hanging on them. Thus to the fund of thought which is Natural Religion the Jew adds the history of Moses, and the Law which rests thereon, the history of the Patriarchs, of the people of Israel, the Prophets, the Scriptures which record all these, and the Doctrines, Commands, Ordinances of Worship which are mingled with all these sacred annals. With this historical addition, the Natural Religion has become Judaism. To the same Natural Religion the Christian adds the life and teachings of Jesus, the preaching of the apostles, the journeys of Paul, and thoughts or Doctrines which came to being or awoke to higher life by reason of those events. With this addition the body of Natural Religion has become the form and stature of Christianity. To this same body of Natural Religion the Moslem adds the history of Mahomet, the story of the revelations given to him, the signs that bore witness to him, and the Doctrines, ideas, commands, communications therefrom in the Scriptures of the Koran. With this addition the Natural Religion has put on the countenance and garments of Islam. Thus it is to be noted first that all the increments by which severally Natural Religion is made into Judaism or Christianity or Islam, or whatsoever other faith, are *historical* adjuncts, or with these also certain augments of ideas or Doctrines which hang on the historical increments; but *always historical*, which is to say, concerned with some particular events at some time and place.

The second thing to be noted touching the addition by each of the believers, by which he brings Natural Religion to be his own special faith, is that the historical increment always becomes more sacred and affecting to the people adding it than the simple-great thoughts themselves, the foundation-truths which are Natural Religion. 'Tis not Natural Religion which lifts and sways the soul of the Jew with rapture; it is what Moses and the Prophets did and said. Not Natural Religion moves the spirit of the Christian by the Angelus, or brings him to his knees on the stones of cloisters with ecstasy; it is the Virgin Mother, the Christ-child, the Transfiguration, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension. Is it Natural Religion which swells the heart of the Moslem and prostrates him at the call of the Muezzin? No, not this, but Mahomet, Mecca and the Koran. I deny not (as, to the glory and virtue of the religious nature in us be it said, who could?) that the simple and grand thoughts of Natural Religion do underly and upbear all the historical augment, and if there were no simple religious depth by nature there could be no historical religion—I gainsay not this; but I say that for a long time, even for many ages, it is the historical increment which most is in the mind of the believers and is most glorifying and affecting to them; and this so much is so that often it is seen Religion seems to them to hang on the history rather than the history on Religion.

Now if we ask *why* it is that the historical part gains this over-power and so affects and flames up in the soul above the simple spiritual part which is Natural Religion, there are many reasons and causes, such as :

Patriotism, pride and love of country or race. For it is to be noted in history that for long ages patriotism and religion are the two greatest moulding forces in human association, and that they lie very close together. Now the historical part of a religion is that portion of it which feeds the pride of race and love of country; for commonly it is conceived as a revelation, favor, adoption vouchsafed from Heaven to that people only and thereby glorifying them. Hence the historical part is seized on passionately by patriotic feeling.

Again, the people turn to the historical addition rather than to the pure and spiritual conceptions because of the need of the

mind (and this the more in primitive or untutored conditions) to hang on pictures or symbols, or to aid thought and feeling by external means, by reference to times, places, persons, names, images, ceremonies. The mind is long and slow in journeying before it comes to the power of resting joyfully with *thoughts*, filled and fed with that rare atmosphere of the spirit. Men must have pictures, symbols, a visible region, a time, a history.

Again, personal force has no little share in the affectingness of the historical increment in religion. For the chief person in the history, the prophet who brings to pass the events or round whom they gather, always is a great and strong person, often very glorious, and his followers who join to make the history are notable and forcible persons also. Hence there is a very strong stream of personal power, of mighty character, in the historical part, and before it the soul of the people bows and is moved deeply.

Again, to this power and greatness of the persons comes Time to do its peculiar magnifying and hallowing. For if the founders and actors of the historical part seemed grand, inspired, divine to those who lived in the same time with them, much more seem they mighty and heavenly to the people who come after, beholding the great persons behind songs and praises, in the magnifications of time, in the mysterious clouds of ages. Wherefore mere lapse of time helps the power of the persons, the pictures, symbols, events, stories which make the historical augment in religion.

Again, the historical part of a religion always is hung with crystals of miracles. Not only the mighty persons themselves are impressive and affecting, and not only has time glorified them, but clouds of transfiguration, portents, wonders and signs, overshadow them. Stories of the marvels worked by them by the miraculous power of their words, or wrought around them by divine favor, by angels and bright visions, spirits and powers, gather around them and shine like halos and splendors, or are awful and terrible. The effect of these stories is very great, for the desire for the marvelous and portentous is very quick in primitive and untaught men. Therefore in religion the historical part, which always is full of miracles, has been precious and sacred to the people.

Again, the historical addition in religion creates an institution, a priesthood. Priests arise not for the spiritual things of Natural Religion, but for the signs, commands, ceremonies, attractions, threats, authority of the great persons and events which form the historical part. Therefore all the power of priests, which is very great, is turned to make large and hold long the reverence of the people for the historical portion in their faith; and this they are able to do effectively.

These and still other reasons, all of which deserve unfolding at length to show the potency of them, make the historical augment in religion more moving and sacred to the people for many ages, as I have said, than the unmingled spiritual things of Natural Religion. But now among these reasons there is one, not yet mentioned, which is a very honorable reason, springing from the most-excellent reverence of the human soul, and strong with the very truth of Natural Religion itself. On this one reason I will ask you to dwell with me particularly.

This reason is the following: that the historical additions mark and accompany a great advance and outbreak of Natural Religion itself. They arise at the moment, and by reason, of a great growth, a step onward, a new forthcoming of spiritual life. "In the fullness of time"—for so it always is, partly because the time makes the man, partly because the man makes the time, and they so work together that they are as one, involved in each other, and that all is done at the very moment which is prepared and ready—"in the fullness of time" arises a teacher, "a voice crying in the wilderness," and the cry always is the same, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, prepare it anew, make it straight in the desert." The teacher cries aloud once more the ancient thoughts, God, Worship, Duty. These thoughts he has of men. They are spoken all around him. They run far back. But he adds to them *something out of himself*, a new fervor, a fresh spirituality, an important stress on some element of them, a step onward in those changes through which they must pass in their slow journey unto simplicity and perfectness. At first men hang only on the teacher's words, his teachings, the new life and deep unfolding which he gives to the old thoughts. But after a time, these teachings seem so great, they so affect the people, and he who has poured such a flood

from his soul and so awaked the ancient things seems so great and divine, that the people begin to hang on the teacher more than on the things he has taught, and when he slips far away into the past they hang on him the more, and remember, sing, adore what he was and did. Thus the teacher himself becomes a historical addition to religion: reverence and adoration of him mingle with the ancient truths to make a new form of religion, a historical religion; a new faith sets out from him with a new name. But this is because his advent and "voice in the wilderness" marked a new refreshment of the spirit, a springing of the ancient truths to a great life, an unfolding of their power more than was conceived, an outpouring and breaking forth of Natural Religion; and often the teacher lays hold mightily of some great thought or advance in religion which never ceases to light up the earth. This is why men, in their gratefulness and love, hang about him and fall to a manner of worship of him, and make the history of him a part of their religion; whence it is that all faiths show themselves to be simple Natural Religion with a historical increment; but the adoration and love for the historical part is, *in origin*, only another form of man's true love and worship in the simplicity of the Natural Religion.

Surely here is a very excellent reason, very honorable to the spirit of man, why the historical addition becomes so adorable, glorious and sacred to the believer of any faith; it affects him even above the Natural Religion of his faith because it marks a high advance of that Natural Religion and a heavenly outbreak of the spirit; and this burst of light, sublime, spiritual, it invests with visible forms and pictures, heroic events, holy persons and grand discourses of them.

To illustrate this, no more is needed than to recount the beginnings of the historical faiths:

Zarathustra found the ancient Persians (so we may trace, or divine or surmise) divided in worship of many gods. This he did away, and collected all into adoration of one God, whom he called Ahuramazda, which means the "Living Lord who is Creator of all"; and the people gathered to the thought and worshiped the One Life and Light under the symbol of a holy fire, with hymns and prayers which are very beautiful and sublime, to be found in the great Zend Scriptures. This was a

great advance of Natural Religion under the name and holy zeal of Zarathustra; wherefore they of that faith hold him very sacred and venerate even above reason the Scriptures that came of his preaching and power.

Moses' great work was like to that of Zarathustra. He found the Hebrew tribes paying homage to many deities, very likely each tribe most to some tutelar deity of its own. Moses chose among them one grand and austere deity, named Jahveh (or Yahweh), whose character was holy and severe, and him Moses proclaimed the One Most High and Holy Lord, "beside whom there was none else," to be worshiped with "clean hands and a pure heart," according to an ethical inspiration called the Ten Words or Ten Commandments; and after many generations and terrible sublime struggles, this One Supreme Lord, this high thought of God, much ennobled during the long conflict, prevailed and filled the Hebrew Spirit. This was a great orth-pouring of Natural Religion; wherefore Moses and the Scriptures that gathered to him, in whose name the advance was famed, became very affecting and sacred to the Jews, and even overcame all reason and fact, so hallowed did the people make it.

Christianity arose in a protest of spirit against form. The Jewish hallowing of Moses and of the ceremonies and traditions that hung on his name, became an intense formalism from which the life wasted away. Jesus arose and cried aloud once more for the life above the form. "Is not the life more than meat and the body than raiment?" said he. This principle with many applications pervaded his teaching. It was his one great burden, his perpetual "voice crying in the wilderness." Not the traditions but the private heart! said he; not the elders, nor even Moses, but your own soul—there are the fountains of authority, the "sources of astonishment and power"; not any time nor place, nor ceremony, tradition, rite, is needful to worship, but only the pure adoring spirit in the heart. Thus the veneration of Moses, which came to pass because of an outburst of the light of Natural Religion under his name, had become such a narrowness of sympathy and of rite, such a fury of zeal, that Natural Religion could hold its way only by dethroning the history which was elevated by a former glorious advance of Re-

ligion. This was the work of Jesus. His simplicity was a direct return once more to Nature and to God, an outbreak of the spirit. Therefore his name, and the discourses, events, stories, Scriptures which came of him or grew around him, drew to themselves a vast reverence, and men fastened with adoration on the history which was the visible body of such a spiritual benefaction; so that the hallowed history became dearer and more affecting to men than the Natural Religion which first had hallowed the history, and has continued so throughout Christendom to this hour.

Buddhism, so far as we may apprehend dimly that gigantic movement in illumined shadow, which exists in "a cloud of transfiguration," followed a like course with these other faiths. Some persons have denied the existence of Buddha, called also Gautama, Sakya-Muni, Siddartha, saying that these were but names for a vast movement of faith among the people of India. But there must have been a mighty person in that great awakening, of whom those names preserve remembrance. He led the people away from caste, from divisions and from priestliness, from Brahma and other deities of the Hindu religion to a purer thought of what is divine, from gods to God. Here therefore was a great advance of Natural Religion, both in divinity of worship and in humane love. At first Siddartha's preaching failed; but at last many were awakened, multitudes were drawn to him. After he died, very little is known for a hundred years of the religion which hangs on his name, and it nearly vanished from India, which still has little of it, though being its birth-place; but it spread widely to other regions, till now it has embraced one-third of the human race. And again, as in other faiths, it is on the pictorial, the heroic events, the history, that the believers have fastened. Buddha himself became such a centre of Divinity as Brahma had been before, and all manner of stories, wondrous miracles and mysteries, very abundant, were deposited in the history like dew from a humid air on ground made ready. This happened, as in the other faiths it did, because a great bursting-forth of Natural Religion converged the people's minds with awe and love to the historical events of it, and created other pictorial traditions, that the people might rejoice the more by vivid images.

With Islam, the youngest of the great world-faiths, the record is the same. Arabia was peopled with many tribes and many gods. Mahomet arose, and before that light in the east the troops of gods fled away, as Milton pictures the flight of the old mythical deities at the birth of Jesus—Appollo, “with hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving,” “Peor and Baalim” forsaking their dim temples, and “sullen Molock,” and

“The brutish gods of Nile as fast,
Isis and Orus, and the dog Anubis haste.”

Mahomet received the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, Moses and Jesus, but he said that he was raised up for the final revelation, the last and chief of all prophets. He proclaimed One Infinite Eternal Presence, One God, One Life; he sung many hymns, prayers and commands which became great Scriptures to the people; and all this he did, as always it is done, in the right and by authority of his own soul, not hanging on any other name, nor deriving from the past, but preaching and commanding in the name of the Living Present. Here was a forth-breaking of Natural Religion, which has come down in the watch-cry of the faith, “There is no god but God and Mahomet is his prophet.” But again it is on the latter part of this watch-cry, on the historical part, that “Mahomet is the prophet,” on this it is that the people have fastened their awe, their passion of belief. Mahomet’s words, writings, deliveries, rhapsodies, are to them absolute and divine. They have a vast awe of the writings and bend to them—to them, the historical, visible part. And by brooding on the history they have become very fierce and fanatical,—foes to all who adore not the same history, how much soever they have the same Natural Religion with them. And yet this they do in truth because of the power in them of that same Natural Religion; for they cling to the history and are fierce for it because, in very truth, it was the occasion or attendant of an advance of the religion of the spirit up from a lower form and out of the bondage of another history.

Now, if I have conceived truly and spoken clearly, I have set forth Natural Religion in one way of viewing it, and also in some measure one way of the growth of it, thus:

1. The few grand and simple thoughts *in which all the different faiths agree* may be called Natural Religion.

2. To these simple and exalted thoughts each faith *adds something* which confers on the faith peculiar identity and its distinction from Natural Religion, and from all other faiths.

3. This addition always is *historical*, which is to say, events and persons.

4. This addition always becomes *more sacred and affecting to the people adding it* than the simple-grand truths which are wholly spiritual and universal.

5. There are *many reasons* why the historical part becomes so hallowed and affecting to the people.

6. But there is one very great and honorable reason, namely, that the historical additions are events and characters which *mark, occur with, or lead a great advance and epoch of Natural Religion*, and by reason of this fact it is that they become so mighty, hallowed and awful in the people's thoughts.

7. That by reason of the historical part becoming so sacred and awful, *what at first was a spiritual forth-breaking becomes absorbed in a mere history and externality*.

8. Thereupon, after a time, a new prophet is needed, and arises, to bring forth religion once more from the history into *the simplicity of the spirit and the authority of the soul*.

If these things have been said plainly, the discourse has attained its purpose and may end. Let it be added only that this view of Natural Religion and of one way or law of the unfolding of it among men, will breed some reflection in us, if we be wise; and gentle behavior, with charitable carefulness, will follow. We shall observe that it is easy for the Jew, the Christian and the Moslem to understand and delight in each other in discoursing of Natural Religion, which is the common ground of them; but it is hard for any one of them to enter into another's historical additions and conceive how they affect the other and how they seem so great, glorious or awful. Nay, the same history that to one seems divine will seem to another but lowly human, and even grotesque very like. So that the religions and sects understand not each other, and the earth hath this strange and sorry spectacle, namely, the different religions or sects falling on each other with wars and cruelties because they

differ in their historical additions to the simplicity of pure Religion in which they all agree. Surely here is a sight to touch the heart with anxiety, with fear, with self-watchfulness, with thoughts of brotherhood.

Moreover, if they of one faith find it so hard to enter into the mind of another faith, can each one be sure that he truly has conceived the inner life of his own faith and entered into it? Surely not always. As the peoples give themselves to the outward additions, the historical part, more than to the simple beauty of the spiritual, so any one may dwell on the poorer portion of even the historical part, leaning him and hanging his thoughts on prodigies, strange happenings or stories, appearances, spectacles, shows of external power; thereby passing by blindly the sublime character, the noble elevation of soul, the divine tenderness, lowly simpleness, patient fervor, which shine in the history, in the great person of it.

Let us be modest and careful; examine ourselves, look well after any bias, rise above the historical part unto simple Natural Religion, but be affectionate to those who still sit in the historical. Let us "covet for ourselves earnestly the best gifts," which are freedom and understanding, and the spiritual conceived above the formal and historical; but let us take also the "still more excellent way," which is love, brotherhood—to "dwell together in unity."